DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 354 209 SO 022 922

AUTHOR Patrick, John J.
TITLE Prominent Places for Historic Places in the K-12 Social Studies Curriculum of the 1990's.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association (107th, Washington, DC, December 27-30, 1992).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Curriculum Development; Educational Change; Educational Objectives; *Educational Resources; Elementary Secondary Education; Local History; *Social Studies; Student Educational Objectives; Teaching Methods; *United States History
IDENTIFIERS *National Register of Historic Places

ABSTRACT

The National Register of Historic Places maintains a database with information on more than 60,000 historic places of significance in U.S. history. This paper contends that the emerging K-12 social studies core curriculum, as exemplified by the National Standards Project, contains a number of openings for teaching about historic places. Specifically, it is demonstrated that historic places can have a prominent place in the history and geography elements of the new social studies core curriculum. Suggestions for how social studies educators may utilize historic places in their teaching also are presented. (DB)

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Prominent Places for Historic Places
in the K-12 Social Studies Curriculum of the 1990's

by

John J. Patrick
Professor of Education
and
Director, Social Studies Development Center
of
Indiana University

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Paper presented at the Program of the 107th
Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association,
December 27-30, 1992, Washington, D.C.

SO 022 427

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John J. Patrick

Curriculum reformers of the 1980's and 1990's have emphasized knowledge and skills that all students should learn to be equipped for intelligent and fruitful participation in the twenty-first century world. In 1983 Ernest Boyer and other leaders of curriculum reform called for development of a new core curriculum for schools. Boyer wrote, "A core of common learning is essential. The basic curriculum should be a study of those consequential ideas, experiences, and traditions common to all of us."[1]

In 1993, Diane Ravitch and other leaders of curriculum reform heralded the work of national standards projects as one means to carry out the continuing calls for a new core curriculum. The mission of these projects is to clearly and compellingly identify what all students need to know and be able to do to become well-educated participants of a vibrant, free society.[2] Three of the National Standards Projects pertain to core subjects of the social studies curriculum: history, geography, and civics.[3]

There are prominent places or openings for content about historic places in the emerging social studies core curriculum exemplified by the National Standards Projects. Historic places are tangible forms of our legacy from preceding generations, and,

like written primary sources, they embody and reflect the traditions, experiences, ideas, and controversies of our past. The National Register of Historic Places maintains a database with information on more than 60,000 historic places of significance in American history. This National Register database includes a variety of properties in all regions of the country, such as workplaces, churches, homes, bridges, government buildings, and so forth.

The historic places in the National Register can be used by teachers and students as objects of inquiry, in the same way that written primary sources are used in the classrooms of good history teachers. When teachers are unable to take students directly to particular sites, because of such barriers as too many miles or too few funds, they can use video programs, packets of photographs, or specially developed learning materials about these places. For example, the National Park Service and the National Trust for Historic Preservation are developing two sets of lesson plans based on historic sites in the National Register: (1) "Teaching with Historic Places" and (2) "American Work, American Workplaces."[4] The contents and pedagogy of these two sets of instructional materials fit directly into the priorities of the History Standards Project, which has included historic places in its list of sources of evidence for historical inquiry by students.[5]

Item six in the History Standards Project's list of

15 criteria guiding the development of history standards says, "Standards should include awareness, appreciation for, and the ability to utilize a variety of sources of evidence from which historical knowledge is achieved, including written documents, oral tradition, literature, artifacts, art and music, historical sites, photographs, and films."[6] Thus, the National History Standards, and school curricula that reflect them, will amply include the use of historic places as primary sources of data for students to interpret, analyze, and evaluate in combination with written documents and other primary sources.

Item 12 in the History Standards Project's list of criteria also pertains directly to the use of historic places in teaching and learning activities: "Standards in U.S. history should utilize regional and local history by exploring specific events and movements through case studies and historical research."[7] The resources of local history and culture certainly are a readily accessible laboratory for studies of culture in the past and present, especially the material culture embodied in historic places. Curricula developed in terms of the History National Standards will include nearby historic places as focal points of investigation. However, lessons on places in local history are flawed if treated in isolation from the larger history and culture of the United States and other parts of the world. The best teaching about places and events of local history connects them to broader events and themes in national and world history.

Historic places as objects of inquiry certainly fit the priorities of the History Standards Project, as indicated by the preceding examples. They also are compatible with the teaching and learning of geography in schools as envisioned by the geography educators of the 1980's and 1990's. For example, geography educators have formulated five fundamental themes as organizers of content and instructional activities in the school curriculum: location, place, relationships within places, movement, and regions.[8]

Teaching and learning about each of these five geography themes can be greatly enhanced through the use of historic places. For example, Brandywine Creek near Wilmington, Delaware, was an important site in the early industrial development of the United States. In 1803, Eleuthere Irenee du Pont built a gunpowder factory along the Brandywine. By 1810, the Eleutherian Mills was the largest gunpowder factory in America. Today, it is preserved as an historic landmark, open to the public. As such, this historic place is a source of data relevant to all five geography themes. Students could conduct investigations about (1) the factory's location along Brandywine Creek, (2) the physical and human characteristics of this place during the first decade of the 19th century, (3) the impact of workers on the environment and its impact on them, (4) the movement of people and goods into and out of this place, and (5) the impact of this place on the development of the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States.[9]

The use of historic places in teaching fundamental themes of geography indicates the great educational value of closely connecting history and geography in the school curriculum. Key concepts of geography, such as location, place, and region, are tied inseparably to major ideas of history, such as time, period, and events. Geography and history in tandem enable learners to understand how events and places have affected each other across time, how people have influenced and been influenced by their environments in different periods of the past.[10]

Historic places clearly can have a large place in the history and geography facets of the emerging K-12 social studies curriculum. They have been prominently recognized in the work of the History Standards Project, and they are compatible with key ideas of the Geography Standards Project. Historic places are valuable primary sources of data to be used in conjunction with primary documents in studies of the past. Historic places can also be used to illuminate fundamental themes of geography. Finally, historic places can become links for builders of curriculum connections between geography and history.

NOTES

1. Ernest L. Boyer, High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 302.

2. The U.S. Department of Education, in collaboration with major associations of scholars and educators, has launched National Standards Projects in mathematics, science, history, geography, civics, the arts, and English.

3. Information on the three National Standards Projects pertaining to the social studies curriculum can be obtained from the following sources: (1) History National Standards Project of the National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA; 231 Moore Hall; 405 Hilgard Avenue; Los Angeles, CA 90024; contact Charlotte Crabtree. (2) Civics National Standards Project of the Center for Civic Education; 5146 Douglas Fir Road; Calabasas, CA 91302; contact Charles Quigley. (3) Geography National Standards Project of the National Council for Geographic Education and the National Geographic Society; 1600 M Street, NW; Washington, DC 20036; contact Anthony de Souza.

4. Information about these curriculum materials can be obtained from Beth Boland, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, D.C. 20013, or Kathleen Hunter, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1785 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, D.C. 20036.

5. Charlotte Crabtree, National History Standards Project: Progress Report and Sample Standards (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, November, 1992), pp. 23-24.

6. Ibid, p. 23.

7. Ibid, p. 24.

8. Joint Committee on Geographic Education, Guidelines for Geographic Education (Washington, DC: Association of American Geographers and the National Council for Geographic Education, 1984); the five fundamental themes of geography education have been incorporated into the Geography Assessment Framework for the 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress, and they are being used in the Geography Standards Project.

9. The Agency for Instructional Technology (AIT) has produced a prize-winning instructional video program for use in secondary schools --"The Industrial North"-- which highlights the Eleutherian Mills. It is part of a 16-program series, America Past, produced in 1987. For information about these video programs, which emphasize historic places, contact AIT, Box A, Bloomington, IN 47402; telephone 800-457-4509.

10. The Agency for Instructional Technology (AIT) has produced a series of 10 video programs, Geography in U.S. History, which emphasize historic places. These programs, produced in 1992, have been designed for use in secondary school U.S. history courses. Two of the programs in this series have been awarded prestigious national prizes. For additional information

about these programs, contact AIT.

John J. Patrick is a Professor of Education at Indiana University, where he also serves as Director of the Social Studies Development Center and Director of the ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education.